Artist/Archaeologist: Akram Zaatari's Memory Practice and Resisting State-Sanctioned Amnesia in the Aftermath of the Lebanese Civil Wars (1975-1990)

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Abstract

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Critical of the governments' response the the Lebanese Civil Wars (1975-1990), artist, photographer, filmmaker, and archivist Akram Zaatari is among a generation of cultural producers working to oppose the politics of amnesia sponsored by the state in post-civil-war Lebanon. This thesis examines three film-based works by Zaatari and their function as a form of critical memory practice that engage with archaeological imagination and material culture to offer a space for reflection on micro-histories of the civil wars. I look closely at *Red Chewing Gum* (2000), *In This House* (2005), and *Letter to Samir* (2009) which focus on a particular material object and work to chip away at the state structures of forgetting. To do so, this thesis takes an oral history approach, drawing on personal interviews with the artist, in conversation with scholars of visual arts, film, archaeology, memory, and history to examine the role of material objects in engagements with the past. My analysis of Zaatari's practice is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, drawing largely from Laura Marks and her conception of the *recollection-object* and the *auratic object* in film, Michael Shanks and Dieter Roelstraete writing on the archaeological imagination, and the artist's own conceptualizations of memory, excavation, and objects, often informed by Gilles Deleuze writing. I argue that Zaatari's films display a form of memory practice which employs objects as a placeholder for past relationships, people, and time, creating an avenue to revisit an unresolved past, an archaeological practice driven by desire and care to resist forgetting.

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To Akram Zaatari, it was an immense pleasure to speak to you, delve into your practice, share stories and hear your amusing anecdotes. This research process would not have been nearly as rich or as memorable without your contributions.

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Preface

"Archaeologists work with what remains."[1]

In working with material remains—objects recovered and imbued with a dynamic of both presence and absence—archaeologists engage in a special type of memory practice. This practice of professional recollecting connects the past with the present. In the context of post-civil war Lebanon, artist Akram Zaatari and several of his peers in the post-war generation of cultural producers, evoke this archaeological imagination in their practice. Together, they create thoughtful discourse regarding the fifteen-year period of the Lebanese Civil Wars and use objectival evidence to oppose state-sponsored amnesia regarding events of the war. In this preface, I introduce Akram Zaatari, offer an overview of the Lebanese civil wars as the complex background driving decades of the artist's work, and present my personal motives for engaging an interview-based methodology.

Zaatari, born in 1966 in Saida, South Lebanon, is a filmmaker, photographer, archivist, curator and, in many ways, an artist-archaeologist whose work is largely based on collecting, studying, and archiving the photographic history of the Arab World and sourcing material artefacts pertinent to the Lebanese Civil Wars. Given the considerable importance of memory to building a sense of belonging and identity, the archaeological imagination, as worked through by Zataari, is implicated in the construction of both collective and personal "senses of self." Lebanese citizens are conscious that state agencies, namely ministries of culture or international bodies such as UNESCO, have access to resources and funding exceeding those of ordinary individuals. As such, they have "extraordinary capacity to manage engagements with the past."[2]

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[1] Michael Shanks, "The Archaeological Imagination," in *The Cambridge Handbook of the Imagination*, ed. Anna Abraham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 47.
[2] Ibid., 49.

Zaatari and others know that within this landscape, smaller communities have had limited sovereignty over what constitutes their "past" as the remit of state agencies remains narrow and specified. The lack of individual and community agency within state-controlled acts of memory and memorialisation cuts to the heart of how artists such as Zaatari use the cultural and personal politics of memory, identity, and representation to offer the citizenry a chance to reclaim, reconsider, and rebuild lost or purposefully neglected histories.

While state agencies have authority to dictate a particular narration of history through state archives of material objects, photographs, and documents, they simultaneously conceal other histories and attempt to dispel certain experiences from public memory. In the context of post-war Lebanon, a lack of an 'official winner' at the resolution of the multifaceted sectarian war led to the total absence of serious governmental initiatives to deal with the country's complicated past. In 1991, the Lebanese government passed an Amnesty Law which effectively granted any former members of militias exemption from criminal prosecution. The amnesia regarding the Lebanese Civil Wars was enforced by numerous state-sponsored initiatives and state resistance against a model of truth and reconciliation, fearing that this would incite further violence between religious and political sects once again. This state-sponsored amnesia creates what Iwona Irwin Zarecka terms a 'memory void,'[3] which evokes the absence within collective recollection, such that Lebanon's post-war reconstruction is a site of displacement, rather than one of memory.[4]

The causes of the Lebanese civil wars were multifaceted and deeply rooted in religious and political sectarianism, the history of which is muddled and difficult to summarise in a few

[3] Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory: The Jew in Contemporary Poland* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 35.
[4] Craig Larkin, *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

pages, as is often the case for civil strife. The fifteen-year period of violence involved several militias from within Lebanon, Palestinian refugees, and several neighbouring nations which heavily contributed to civil unrest. Palestinian, Israeli, and Syrian troops were directly involved, and in later years of the war between 1982 and 1985, Lebanon became a hotspot for Soviet-American fault lines and Inter-Arab rivalries among Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Saudi Arabia.[5] Considering the various foreign actors involved in Lebanon and in funding Lebanese militias, many historians describe the events of the war as a *war of the others*.[6] The overwhelming battles claimed an estimated 170,000 deaths, wounding 340,000 more, and displacing two-thirds of the population.[7] At the end of the Lebanese civil wars in 1991, a period began in which official efforts focused on deploying a series of policies that would make citizens forget the long period of violence. These actions discouraged attempts to work through the events of the war, or to demand justice for war crimes committed throughout the many years of strife.

The Taif Agreement of 1989 marked the beginning of the end of the war, which was designed to reassert Lebanese government authority in southern Lebanon, controlled at the time by the Christian-separatist South Lebanon Army under the hegemony of Israel. The Agreement established a framework for the beginning of a complete Syrian withdrawal from the state. An official amnesty law was adopted when the Lebanese Parliament decided to disarm and demobilize all militias, and reintegrate these militias into the regular forces. "The amnesty

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[5] For this reason, I prefer to use the plural form (Lebanese Civil Wars) because many wars between various militias, political parties, and armies existed during the fifteen years of conflict as described by Danes and Haugbolle. Maria Domene Danes, "Ar(t)chive Production in Post-War Lebanon," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2018), 18.
Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 16.
[6] Haugbolle, *War and Memory*, 42.
[7] Danes, "Ar(t)chive Production," 6. Craig Larkin, "Beyond the War? The Lebanese Postmemory Experience*," International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 617.

applies to crimes committed before March 1991, including 'crimes against humanity and those which seriously infringe human dignity.' Only crimes committed against religious or political leaders are exempt from the law."[8] As Sami Hermez aptly explains it, "this meant that perpetrators of a massacre of civilians could not be prosecuted, whereas perpetrators of an assassination or attempted assassination of a political leader could be."[9] The law left everyday Lebanese citizens with no possibility of investigating the disappearances and crimes that had occurred during the conflict, suspending the processes of working through a traumatic past and finding closure. The Amnesty Law imposed, "official silence and *tabula rasa* politics that aimed to erase the memory of these violent events." Yet despite these efforts, memories of the conflicts continued to make their way into communal perceptions and to structure daily life.[10]

Despite the bulldozing effect of Lebanese state-sponsored amnesia at the end of the millennium Michael Shanks reminds us that, "in working with what remains, we are all archaeologists."[11] Zaatari is amongst a post-war generation of cultural producers who worked with "what remained" in a bid to oppose the politics of amnesia in Lebanon, participating in a boom of art practices centred around memory and archives. This "archival impulse" was prevalent in the post-war generation of artists and was unique to the Lebanese context. While certain approaches can be employed as a strategy of restitution in some cases, the generation of artists in Lebanon resisted destruction and erasure by embracing "the framework of absence," by "focus[ing] on subjects that are anti-heroic, ordinary, or invented, as well as fragmented, micro-stories of the war."[12] As Chad Elias asserts, this generation of artists challenges a politics that

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[8] Sami Hermez, *War is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 180.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Danes, "Ar(t)chive Production," 7.
[11] Shanks, "The Archaeological Imagination," 48.
[12] Danes, "Ar(t)chive Production," 18.

claims to 'give a voice' to the 'victims' of the war, while being equally sceptical of the possibility of writing an alternative history of the civil wars period from the point of view of its victims. The post-war generation of Lebanese artists make it impossible for audiences to (re)construct a single narrative of the wars drawn from the archives used in their artworks. In this way, as Maria Domene Danes suggests, this group of artists in Lebanon differ from the previous wartime generation of artists who aimed to make visible the violence and trauma of the wars. These artists have been less interested in "resolution" than in examining the grain of history "by way of resisting the premature closure of forgetting upon which governmentally sanctioned amnesties, treaties, and even cultural projects have insisted."[13]

Over the past year, I am grateful to have had a chance to discuss Zaatari's body of work with the artist himself, in conversations where we discussed his past and current projects, his experiences in the art world, and his many travels. As part of the Lebanese diaspora, I had personal motives to speak to Zaatari. I was curious to speak to him not just as a practising artist and researcher, but also as a witness of the Lebanese Civil Wars who had extensively documented much of his experiences from Saida, South Lebanon, and offered a chance for me to hear a perspective from someone outside my non-immediate family. As Alessandro Portelli puts it, "the root meaning of the word *dialogue* is to "to speak across," "to speak beyond."[14] Portelli suggests that the crucial element is space, social and geographic: the distance, the difference, the *otherness* between two partners involved in an interview or conversation—I add the distance created by time, as well. Portelli writes, "what the [conversation] is about is the distance we have to cross in order to speak to each other. Similarity makes the [conversation] possible; difference

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[13] Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari, "Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed," *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (2014): 51.
[14] Alessandro Portelli, "Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience," *Oral History Review* 45, no. 2 (2018): 241.

makes it meaningful."[15] Closing the distance between Zaatari and myself was, in a way, a form of memory practice in itself; while we were able to have in-depth conversations about several of his works across his decades-long practice, Zaatari shared many introspective anecdotes about his experiences in the civil wars, his current work, studies, and global movements, connecting his past to our present.

[15] Ibid., 242.

Introduction

Akram Zaatari and his peers in the post-war generation of Lebanese artists work to re-envision a history of the Lebanese Civil Wars separate from bureaucratic forms of history-telling. These alternative forms of archiving and "archival knowing" question the material, formal aspect of an archive and its immaterial, informal procedures of archiving. As Anthony Downey asserts, "these artists are not simply questioning veracity, authenticity or authority; rather they interpose forms of contingency and radical possibility into the archive that sees it projected onto future, rather than historical, possibilities."[16] These practices do not foster a nostalgic fetishization of the archive as a locus of knowledge production, but alternatively serve as an institutional critique of the production of official histories and archives and their relationship to the future. Jacques Derrida contends in *Archive Fever*, "archival technology no longer determines, will never have determined, merely the moment of the conservational recording, but rather the very institution of the archivable event."[17] The technical structure of the archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content, even its very coming into existence, and in its relationship to the future. As such, the archive is an "irreducible experience of the future" which Zaatari's generation of artists in Lebanon work to deconstruct.

This study contributes to a body of research that examines the issue of post-war memory in Lebanon through the lens of contemporary cultural production. Several authors such as Chad Elias, Sune Haugbolle, Craig Larkin, and Lucia Volk discuss the tension between the production and circulation of popular memory in social spaces and communities, "and its critical

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[16] Anthony Downey, "Contingency, Dissonance, and Performativity: Critical Archives and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Art," in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I.B Tauris, 2015), 15.
[17] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 18.

appropriation in the overlapping fields of urbanism, film, and the visual arts."[18] Haugbolle, for example, attempts to define the production of memory through what he refers to as "memory cultures" which describe the production of historical memory and the variety of "overlapping agendas, issues and interpretations" prevalent in the post-war Lebanese context.[19] Haugbolle employs the term, "memory makers," which describes "people of the creative class who became occupied with questions of how to memorialise the war through social and artistic activities, and produced books, testimonies, films, articles, graffiti and architecture through which the war was remembered."[20] Haugbolle argues that these middle-class representations often left out "subaltern voices," while in other cases, these cultural producers had a tendency to victimise the low-income "little man" in their films and visual art.[21] I disagree with Haugbolle's assertion that these "memory makers" who dominated representations of the civil war (emerging from calls to counter state-sponsored amnesia) were "mostly middle-aged, middle-class leftist artists and intellectuals… [who] privileged their own lived memories of prewar middle class and radical Beirut."[22] Instead, I reiterate Elias' assertion that "such a reproach functions both to reinforce an all-too-rigid binary between popular and elite forms of cultural production and to confuse, once again, the critical redeployment of popular memory with mere nostalgia."[23] Additionally, Zaatari and his colleagues, unlike Haugbolle's "memory makers," are "equally sceptical of the possibility of writing an alternative history of the civil war period from the point of view of its victims."[24]

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[18] Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 10.
[19] Haugbolle, *War and Memory*, 8.
[20] Ibid., 9.
[21] Ibid., 121.
[22] Ibid., 129
[23] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 11.
[24] Ibid.

Shifting from the bureaucratic and disciplined approach to history indicated by terms like "archive" or "document," one can turn to more paleographic metaphors to describe Zaatari's encounter with material culture and photographic objects. To replace terms such as "readymade" or "found" I maintain that Zaatari works with "fossils" which impute to the object a sense of its being discovered and unearthed while also maintaining a sense of both its original integrity and its transformation over time.[25]

I look closely at three of Zaatari's films, *Red Chewing Gum* (2000), *In This House* (2005), and *Letter to Samir* (2008) which each focus on a particular material object and work to chip away at the structures of forgetting which have surrounded narratives of the Lebanese Civil Wars. *Red Chewing Gum*, or *Al-Ilka Al-Hamra* is a fictional video-letter that recounts the story between two men, presumably lovers, who were separated at the start of the wars. The film explores issues of desire, sexuality, and consumption between two men and a young vendor boy, revolving primarily around a pack of chewing gum which the lovers share. *In This House* is a documentary which focuses on a handwritten letter penned by a Lebanese resistance fighter that was placed in an empty mortar shell and buried in the garden of a house he occupied during the conflict in south Lebanon. Through Zaatari's intervention, the buried letter is, years later, unearthed and read aloud. Lastly, *Letter to Samir* is another documentary in which Zaatari asks ex-prisoner Nabih Awada to write, and uniquely package, a letter to be sent to Samir al-Qintar, Israel's longest-held Lebanese prisoner, the contents of which remain unknown to the viewer.

My analysis of Zaatari's films is usefully informed by Laura Marks' conception of the *recollection-object* which she defines as "an irreducibly material object that encodes collective

[25] Feldman and Zaatari, "Mining War," 51.

memory" and can describe films and videos that excavate memories from objects.[26] Marks draws from Deleuze's writing to describe the charged nature of these objects in film, especially.

> When Deleuze writes: 'The present itself exists only as an infinitely contracted past which is constituted at the extreme point of the already there,' the words 'infinitely contracted past' seem to describe the souvenir object, that stubborn survivor from another place-time that brings its volatile contents to the present.[27]

Red Chewing Gum, *In This House*, and *Letter to Samir*, despite the distinction between fiction and documentary, expose the dynamic presence of a material object and its ability to bring sensations of the past, which the object arouses within us, into the present. Marks' recollection-object works conjointly with Zaatari's own term *informed object*—"an object that is conscious of the material and processes that produced it, conscious of its provenance, its morphology and displacement over time, conscious of its history in the sense that it is able to communicate it."[28]

Zaatari and Marks' approach to material culture insists that objects do not merely speak, but rather, that they have *something to say*, and what they "say" must be activated through an encounter, real or imagined, with the object. As Shanks discusses, the archaeological imagination involves a particular sensibility and orientation to the dynamic interplay of both the presence and the absence of the past within what remains. The materially present object can only ever point to the immateriality of intangible past events. Every such objectival experience involves two inherent aspects, duration and encounter. Shanks writes, "any archaeological [work]...requires duration, the persistence of remains from the past into the present, and actuality, the encounter with the remains of the past in the present."[29] Rather than working to produce a narrative history

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[26] Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 77.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Steven Matijcio, *FotoFocus Biennial: Open Archive* (Cincinnati, Ohio: FotoFocus, 2018).
[29] Shanks, "The Archaeological Imagination," 48.

of the multifaceted Lebanese Civil Wars, the primary interest of Zaatari's archaeological imagination can be described by what Dieter Roelstraete refers to as, "an *alternative* History Channel or as an alternative to *established* History Channels—not so much a site for mere memory as…a *countermemory*."[30] Zaatari's approach to history allows us to approach images and objects with an eye to their engagement with contradiction, irreconcilability, and multiplicity.[31]

Roelstraete writes,

> Art and archaeology also share a profound understanding of the primacy of the material in *all* culture, the overwhelming importance of mere 'matter' and 'stuff' in *any* attempt to intuitively grasp and read the cluttered fabric of the world, the cuneiform of things. Art and archaeology alike remind us of both the irreducible materiality of the world in the age of its purported dematerialization and the nonnegotiable historicity of all life in the age of forgetting.[32]

Red Chewing Gum, In This House, and many of Zaatari's works throughout his long-spanning career show a care for "stuff," objects, and physical photographs for their potential to reveal fragments of the micro-histories of individuals and their interpersonal relationships, both real and invented. As I will discuss throughout my thesis, Zaatari investigates the duration of an object, its displacement over time, how it has evolved both physically and poetically until—and in many instances after—his encounter with these material objects ended. I discuss the archaeological imaginary and the relationship between people and interpersonal relationships with material culture.

The guiding questions of my thesis are: In what ways does Zaatari's practice evoke the archaeological imagination and to what effect? How and why is Zaatari's memory practice

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[30] Dieter Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel*: *On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 27.
[31] Feldman and Zaatari, "Mining War," 53.
[32] Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel*, 47.

focused on material objects? To what effect does a memory practice revolving around material objects offer a space for reflection on micro-histories of the Lebanese Civil Wars outside of state-sanctioned amnesia? *Red Chewing Gum* and *In This House* engage with material objects very distinctly; in the former, a narrator remembers an experience fifteen years ago through his associations with a mundane object and the senses and intimate relationships with which the object is imbued. In the latter, an object from the past is excavated and encountered within the present, revealing the "radioactivity" of this written artefact and its ability to bring past sentiments into the present. The unearthed letter beckons the viewer to excavate the past "even at his or her peril."[33] What connects these two objects is the peculiar potential for a material artefact, whether mundane or unique, to collapse time and space, and activate memories within chronologically separated moments.

The first chapter of my thesis provides a background for my chosen methodology of oral history research, and my experiences of unpacking Zaatari's long-standing practice through my one-on-one conversations with the artist. My discussions with Zaatari led me to unpack the theoretical components of his practice, as well as major themes of his work over the past two decades. In Chapter 2, I look closely at *Red Chewing Gum*, the earliest of the three films discussed in this thesis, and examine the sensorial aspect of memory recollection within queer intimacies. The third chapter is a close exploration of Zaatari's documentary-style films, *In This House*, and *Letter to Samir,* made three years apart. Both works focus on different letters, the former of which is uncovered and recited, while the contents of the latter are preserved for a future moment. My concluding chapter brings the three works into dialogue as I reflect on underlying desires for the past, the role of intimacy, and the place of interpersonal relationships

[33] Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 81.

in the formation of the archive—a formation which is simultaneously a de-formation—a picking away of archival structures to uncover lost layers.

Chapter 1: Zaatari's Practice and Oral History as Methodology

"Most of curatorial history is oral history; it's very much a story that can only be *told* because it's not yet been *written*."—Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Infinite Conversations*

I was first introduced to Zaatari's work in 2020, when I saw photos online taken by the late Lebanese portrait photographer Hashem El Madani who made portraits of many of Saida's residents in the 1960s and 70s in his Studio Shehrazade. As an artist born in South Lebanon, Zaatari stumbled upon Madani's archives in 1998 and went on to preserve many of the Studio's images under the auspices of the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) that Zaatari co-founded in 1997 with photographers Fouad Elkoury and Samer Mohdad. What struck me most about the images I encountered from Madani's 75,000+ photo archive was how much fun the sitters seemed to be having; many were posed with studio props, wearing costumes, playing characters, and re-enacting dramatic scenes. Many of the pictures show subjects interacting in pairs, embracing, kissing, acting out scenes—a mock wrestling match or weddings, for example. I was quickly mesmerised by the vast number of photos that existed and surprised by some of the sitters' creative choices made in the 1950s. In one photo, for example, Najm and Asmar, two male friends act out getting married—Asmar wears a veil and holds a bouquet of flowers while Najm embraces him (Fig. 1). In another picture, Abu Jalal Dimassy and two of his friends dress up and act out a hold-up, his two friends pointing pistols at him—one of his friends breaking character and cracking a smile (Fig. 2).

The photographs in Madani's archive revealed prevailing local customs in South Lebanon, the complexities of gender and sexual expression, and deconstructed perceptions of dress and social taboos of the time. Looking at only a few of Madani's photographs, Zaatari's devotion to the Studio Shehrazade archive was immediate. As he later wrote: "Like objects

collected by an archaeologist or a connoisseur, the images become attached to another person besides the one who made them or is their subject, someone who discovers them, and whose own life and interests become entangled in them."[34]

What was most daunting as a novice interviewer prior to my initial conversations with Zaatari was the vast information that existed online about the artist and the many interviews he had done with other curators, writers, and researchers internationally. It seemed that he had already said everything that needed to be said about his work over the past two decades. In reading over numerous interviews, I sensed that Zaatari was repeatedly asked versions of the same questions over the course of his career. I asked him whether or not he reads all the content published online. Laughingly, he said, "no." While he did acknowledge that artists can be "obnoxious," when it comes to being questioned about their work, Zaatari did mention some of the frustration of reading lengthy analyses about some of his works by writers who never reach out to him:

> Especially journalists, I'm surprised. If they asked me, of course I give them time, I give them hours, and I give them clues to understand the work, and make comparisons for them. Why do they not talk to me if they want to dedicate 30 pages about a single one of my works? You need to talk to me."[35]

It seemed that, despite the vast amount of information on Zaatari that was published, some of these authors seemed to be missing crucial 'clues' to read and write about his work.

'Artist's intent' is a concept in flux, and its value in art historical discourse is constantly re-examined. While an artist's statement may provide a general ideological context in which to position the work under discussion, in-depth interviews offer a platform for dialogue to probe beyond a brief description of the work by the artist. Considering that I am focusing on works that

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[34] HG Masters, "A Sentimental Dedication: Akram Zaatari," *ArtAsiaPacific* 90 (2014): 93.
[35] Akram Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, November 9, 2022.

Zaatari has created over two decades ago, his intentions or position on his films can be drastically inconsistent with what he has said or written about his work from years ago. Rebecca Gordon discusses potential changes in the artist's intent over time, writing that "it's potential variation need not lead to mistrust but when understood as a qualitative, subjective source it can provide nuanced and valuable information beyond expectation, much in the same way as the subjectivity of the oral history is one of its greatest assets."[36] Considering the artist's intent, then, can provide insight into the artwork's conceptual position within the artist's oeuvre and the artist's view of the artwork in light of the development of their practice over time. With this consideration, and given the right line of questioning, Zaatari and I could discuss his older work and tease out different frames of dissecting it. We saw the benefits of this temporal distance as a value in art historical writing rather than as a complication or hindrance.

My initial research before my conversations with Zaatari was a scatter plot of art works that I could discuss with him, the many works he had done over the past two decades in numerous mediums, over fifty films and videos, photographs, collections of photographs, installations, and site-specific works. Considering the vault of interviews, talks, and conversations by Zaatari over the years of his practice, my first inclination was to ask him what was next in store for him. He explained to me that he was working on his PhD, studying nineteen sarcophagi excavated from the Sidon Necropolis (current-day Saida, Lebanon) in 1887 by Osman Hamdi Bey, which were then transported to Europe. In his research, Zaatari found that the politics in the Ottoman Empire were very similar to the Lebanese political landscape of the current day which consisted of a number of separatist alliances. Zaatari's interest lies in the fact that Hamdi Bey was also himself an artist and photographer, and not an archaeologist, despite

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[36] Rebecca Gordon and Erma Hermens, "The Artist's Intent in Flux," *CeROArt* [Online], HS | 2013, DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ceroart.3527.

having led the Sidon Necropolis excavations. Zaatari's focus for his ongoing project *Father and Son* is two sarcophagi; the sarcophagus of Eshmunazar II, which is at the Louvre in Paris, and the sarcophagus of Eshmunazar II's father, King Tabnit, which is on display at the Istanbul Museum, separated by two large archaeological institutions.

For *Father and Son*, Zaatari's interest lies in the provenance of these objects, and more so the traces of destruction left on these objects. He tells me,

> These traces are there, and we first need to learn to see them. Very often, our interest in the object and what remains in the object is by far larger than the parts that the object lost. So you're happy with the object, you celebrate the object, and you forget the fact that it has breaks, that it's missing parts. Where and when did we start missing parts? How do missing parts intervene in the reading of the objects, especially emotionally? When you go to a museum, you see a reconstruction of an object in four to five pieces, but few people notice that the object has been broken and put back together…yet [destruction] is an inherent part of the archaeological practice. It's like displaying a [severed] finger and not divulging who it belonged to, or why it was [severed]. It is scary—sometimes archaeology can be scary. So what I'm doing is to embrace all the history of the objects living, and bring *violence* as an integral part of the story of an object.[37]

While Zaatari considers his conservation of Madani's Studio Shehrazade as an "archaeological excavation" in more metaphorical terms, the artist's ongoing project investigates a literal archaeological dig in the more conventional sense.[38] A common theme I noticed in several readings about Zaatari's past and current work is his interest in investigating objects of past economies, and how they function in the present. Zaatari tells us that Hamdi Bey spent a month and a half in Saida, with a team that was digging into the earth looking for artifacts not simply for their fascination with the past, but to sell to tourists and dealers of European collections and institutions. Zaatari brings up questions of sovereignty—who owns the things

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[37] Akram Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, November 24, 2022.
[38] Masters, "A Sentimental Dedication," 93.

found under the Earth—and the lack of regulations in the Ottoman Empire and in European courts. In the same way, Zaatari's work with Madani's archive and the AIF explores how Madani's films and physical photographs were produced to circulate in a very specific economy in the second-half of the twentieth-century. Studio Shehrazade's photographs were tied to a moment in history with the popularization of portrait photography in urban centers that brought imagery directly into the lives of everyday citizens. These photographs "end up in so many different places; in pockets, drawers, wallets, living rooms."[39] Meanwhile, those same photos are now used in an entirely different context within art institutions, such as the Tate Britain's collection of over one hundred of Madani's original photographs.[40]

Zaatari's engagement with Madani's vernacular photography archive is an excavation involving the transfer of "an artifact from one economy into another."[41] In *The Skin of the Film*, Marks finds that to understand how history is encoded in objects, it is useful to apply Marxist theorizations of fetishism and representation with anthropological theories of exchange. Marks draws on Arjun Appadurai to argue that the "commodity status" of an object is highly mobile in cross-cultural movement; objects may pass in and out of identities as commodity, gift, ritual object, or trash. As Marks writes, "through their travels and through being owned and used, objects become singular, gaining a biography…objects provide maps of their travels, the people who produced and came into contact with them, and the shifts in their values as they move."[42] Zaatari has discussed the potential for understanding history through the traces left on a physical material in depth, using Deleuze's concept of *the fold*:

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[39] Akram Zaatari, "Against Photography," lecture, Ashkal Alwan: Public Talks, September 21, 2018, Beirut, in-person, 1:00:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rh2MwYX-4NU.
[40] Feldman and Zaatari, "Mining War," 57.
[41] Anthony Downey and Akram Zaatari, "Photography as Apparatus: Akram Zaatari in Conversation with Anthony Downey," *Critical Interventions* 12, no. 2 (2019): 225.
[42] Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 96.

> The fold is the pleat, formed by turning or bending a part of a material such as fabric, paper, or even sedimentary rock or soil. The fold is at once the form the material takes after such an event, and also the trace that is left on the material (the crease that marks the location of turning or pressing). Inherent to folding is that the material turns and occupies or engages with space around it.[43]

Folding can be intentional, or accidental or natural with aging matter or in geological shifts or reactions to climate, such that the material undergoes a permanent deformation. As Zaatari sees it, the fold is a form of narration, and folding sacrifices parts for a purpose, concealing some parts and highlighting others.

Unfolding a piece of paper, on the other hand, as Zaatari describes is,

> Opening it up, reversing the steps until the paper is unfolded. Unfolding is undoing, deconstructing, dismantling, turning material to its original form. The creases of an unfolded paper contain its history, and in a way, save it from amnesia, from forgetting. The history of material inscribes itself in the form of creases. When unfolded, material would testify that history has already inscribed itself onto it, through the fold.[44]

The result of the fold and the unfold is the memory of material. Zaatari stresses that to unfold is not the opposite of folding, but rather an extension of it and an essential process in identifying the material's morphology and structure. Folding and unfolding is about tracing the memory and biography of an object with an acknowledgement that traces are left on an object over time. Reflecting on the artist's preservation of Madani's archives from 1998 to the present-day, as well as his ongoing work *Father and Son* over twenty years later, Zaatari has shown a consistent commitment to an ethics of care embedded in his archival practice, a care for material culture, physical photographs and objects, and "a care for things that are very trivial and banal," as the artist puts it.[45] Zaatari is in tune with the idea that objects have *something to say* and is listening

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[43]Akram Zaatari, "The Fold," lecture, Virginia Commonwealth University: Wavelength Lecture Series, January 26, 2021, online, 1:22:36, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvmL2_6QTWk.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, November 9, 2022.

intently. In our discussions of the fold, Zaatari used the example of a piece of chewing gum in a prison ward,

> Imagine you have a prison room where people are not allowed chewing gum. There are 60 prisoners in one ward. There is a piece of gum that one person brought into the prison, and this piece of gum was chewed by the first prisoner, and then given to the second, and then given to the third, etc. So it has been chewed 59 times, if not 60 times…. This is by far no longer a piece of gum. It's a piece of gum plus so many other things. It is capable of telling us so many things that happened to it.[46]

Zaatari's scene highlights the malleability of an object, in this case a piece of chewing gum and its movement from one prisoner to another. Zaatari uses the french term, *l'objet savant*—"every object knows." By the sixtieth chew, the piece of gum—or what's left of it at least—is masticated and transformed. While materially the chewing gum is the same (combined with the saliva of the sixty prisoners), it has undergone a physical and emotional transformation by those who have chewed it over and over; the piece of gum is representative of all the prisoners who are now connected to each other through its mastication while still maintaining a consciousness and an ability to communicate its morphology and change over time.

In our conversations, Zaatari relates traces of an object to Canadian artist Lisa Steele's 1974 film *Birthday Suit – with scars and defects* where the artist chronicles her own body's passage over time. In *Birthday Suit*, Steele reveals, touches, dates, and traces every scar and injury she has sunstained on her body, "looking at her body as a record of physical injury."[47] Zaatari finds that Steele's method of tracing her physical body as a form of biography is an epitome of his approach when investigating material culture, documents, and physical photographs. Zaatari's engagement with objects and documents is not necessarily through the

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[46] Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, November 24, 2022.
[47] Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, November 9, 2022.

actual content or utility of the physical item, but rather through the traces, marks, and defects which the object sustains over time that elucidate its provenance, biography, and morphology over time.

While Steele's *Birthday Suit* traces the injuries on her own body from her lifetime, Zaatari's investigations of material culture which he excavates, unearths, and finds from different periods of economic transaction requires inference to explain the traces left on these objects. Inference and deduction are crucial elements to Zaatari's investigations of material culture; his practice involves a scientific approach to the materiality of documents and photographs, combined with care and a curiosity about the people, economies, and stories to which they are connected. As Zaatari explains, in the case of photographs, his interest has to do with the *path* a physical photograph takes and not necessarily the actual content of the photograph itself. In his 2018 exhibition *The Third Window* at Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut, Zaatari delves into the AIF's photography archives to look for elements that were not intended when a photograph was first made, while also following unexpected occurrences that happen once a photograph moves into the world. The artist studies accidents, contamination to a photographer's negatives, and changes in climate, studying physical photographs as informed objects that can speak to their displacement and change over time. In his 2017 series *Against Photography* (Fig. 3), Zaatari relies on methods used in archaeology, such as 3D scanning, to record the textured surfaces of deteriorating photographic negatives and uncover what is buried in the banalities of photographic processes and chemical changes.

In 1948, the State of Israel was announced, and in the years that followed, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians left or were forced to leave their homes and villages, abandoning all their belongings, entire libraries, photo albums, clothes, silverware, and handcrafts, amongst so

many other objects—which were sometimes sold, looted, or discarded. As Zaatari explains, to challenge what was rewritten, many look for photographs of Palestinians leaving, crossing the bridge, settling in camps, etc. Many look for photographs of Israeli aggression as evidence of historical record, but Zaatari asks, "could this history be told by pointing at aggression towards random photographs as opposed to pointing at the content of photographs?"[48] Palestinian Armenian photographer Antranik Bakerdjian photographed his own home after it was destroyed in the bombing of the Armenian quarter in Jerusalem in May 1948, and later photographed his neighbours after taking refuge in the Armenian convent of Saint James. In 1998, artist Yto Barrada travelled to Ramallah and Jerusalem looking for photographic collections for the recently-founded AIF. Bakerdjian agreed to donate his negatives to the AIF, which he would never see again. The collection of 35mm negatives was delivered to Fouad Elkoury, a cofounder of the AIF, who was meant to carry them to Beirut. Elkoury "wasn't at ease with how the rolls smelled," so he washed them in his own darkroom, cleaned, and numbered them.[49] Years later, an AIF archivist noticed that the emulsions on a dozen rolls had developed cracks, causing distortion of the images, and other parts of the images had disappeared completely. Patches of transparency invaded some rolls, erasing certain spots on the emulsion "like a rash or skin disease."[50] As Zaatari writes, "the gelatin and nitrate bases of these rolls, their structural bodies, testify to the instability of their historical context, and, indirectly, to their displacement."[51] Zaatari and his team at the AIF speculate several possible causes for the deterioration, possibly

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[48] Zaatari, "Against Photography," lecture, Ashkal Alwan.
[49] Akram Zaatari, "Artist Intervention: All That Refuses To Vanish," *Future Anterior* 15, no. 1 (2018): 66.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Bakerdjian's photographs recorded events such as the visits of King Abdullah of Jordan to Jerusalem in 1948-49 and Glubb Pasha to the Armenian quarter of Jerusalem in 1948, summer camps of Armenian youth in Deir Amar, several family occasions, and photographs of thousand locations across the region. Ibid.

Bakerdjian's makeshift darkroom at the Armenian convent, the wash that Elkoury might have given the rolls in 1998, poor conservation, or reaction to climate changes in their displacement. Zaatari writes,

> The wonderful thing about photography is that confirmation of what has triggered these phenomena can rarely be reached. Yet there is so much poetry in how these images resist preservation, detaching themselves slowly from the bases to which they have been bound for almost seventy years now. Their disintegration, not their depiction of events, is their contribution to history.[52]

In this case, Zaatari's view of photography relies not only on the content of the image, but rather on the dynamic habitat of sets of relationships, social, and political codes that encompass the photograph and the photographic process. In the case of Bakerdjian's negatives, displacement through dynamic shifts of place, space, and time register on the body of the film.

Zaatari describes photography and its surrounding context with terms such as *habitat* and *ecosystem* to describe the many elements that function within the economy of photography past and present, and the role that photography plays in social lives.[53] "Imagine love stories without photographs"[54] he tells me, explaining that the invention of photography quickly became an essential aspect of our lives—"photographs inform us, but also affect us."[55] As Ana Maria Maia writes, "the idea of ecology [of photographs] entails the notion of an ecosystem, a chain of existences that establishes links between each living being, other species and the conditions of the environment that they are a part of."[56] Zaatari's use of language that evokes the natural environment is also related to conservation, such that the preservation of photographs relies on

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, November 24, 2022.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Zaatari, "Against Photography," lecture, Ashkal Alwan.
[56] Ana Maria Maia, "Her mirror, A kaleidoscope," in *Rosângela Rennó: Little Ecology of the Image* (São Paulo: Pinacoteca de São Paulo, 2021), 9.

an ecosystem of protections: certain temperature, light, and humidity conditions must always be met. The artist also ponders the carbon output of every photographic process, taking into consideration the effects of photographic conservation on the natural environment and the power necessary to protect physical photographs. Photographs can thus carry, or may themselves be, residues of transactions beyond their content, and can be read through their intangible fabric that ties them to a series of habitats.

Discussing these elements of photography and material culture with Zaatari elucidates his interest in the travel of objects across space and time, and their changing meanings in different economies and social contexts. While Zaatari's work encompasses several mediums including photography, the focus of my thesis is on three of the artist's moving image works: *Red Chewing Gum*, *In This House*, and *Letter to Samir*.

Chapter 2: *Red Chewing Gum* (2000), Sugar, and Queer Intimacy in Hamra

"I hope you remember Hamra as it was fifteen years ago and the boy with the red chewing gum. We were walking in an alley and that boy was carrying a box of chewing gum. He was chewing one piece of gum after another, throwing each away and saying 'there's no sugar left.'"[57]

Red Chewing Gum (*Al-ilka al-hamra)* is a ten-minute-long film, and one of Zaatari's earlier and shorter works made in collaboration with Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts in 2000. The film was Zaatari's contribution to the *Hamra Street Project* (2000), an art initiative curated by Christine Tohmé.[58] The film tells the story of the separation of two young lovers in the form of a video letter during the early onset of the Lebanese Civil Wars. The film is set in the dynamic neighbourhood of Hamra, one of Beirut's major commercial districts, home to many restaurants, cafes, bars, hotels, and a centre of lively nightlife to this day. During the Civil Wars, as Sofian Merabet details, the Hamra district became a well-known hangout for queer men who could meet it in its narrow streets.[59] *Red Chewing Gum* is composed mainly of scenes filmed in a studio setting, intertwined with what seems to be actual raw film footage of the neighbourhood taken by the narrator's lover.

The narrator of the film, voiced by Walid Sadek in Arabic with English subtitles, recounts walking through the streets of Hamra fifteen years earlier with his lover. The couple follow and closely observe a young street vendor chewing pieces of gum, quickly developing an interest in his peculiar ritual of compulsively masticating pieces of Chiclets—a widely available American candy-coated chewing gum known for its yellow packaging. Chewing one piece of

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[57] Akram Zaatari, *Red Chewing Gum (Al-Ilka Al-Hamra)* (Beirut: 2000), film.
[58] Elia Eliev, "Un/Disclosing Queerness in Akram Zaatari's Al-ilka al-hamra (2000)," *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 6, no. 3 (Winter 2020): 391.
[59] Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 84.

white gum after another, the vendor sucks out all the sugary juice and spits the remains out into a little box repeating that "there's no sugar left," (Fig. 4).[60]

In the opening scene, a young man is seen in a dark alleyway, chewing on a piece of gum and looking directly at the camera, expressionless. The scene cuts to the lively street of Hamra bustling with pedestrians with the sounds of cars honking, suggesting that the Civil Wars have yet to occur. Later, shots of the streets of Hamra are juxtaposed with sounds of gunshots as the narrator explains, "when we were walking on a side street, hiding from the stray bullets around us, we took a little road with yellow buildings when the boy [vendor] hurried ahead of us [with a box of gum] finding safety."[61] The couple watch the vendor sit down in a dark alleyway, open his box of Chiclets and chew pieces of gum one after the other. The narrator tells his lover, "I haven't seen you since that day since we were walking that dark alley following the gum boy."[62]

Among the pile of masticated white gum, a chewed single red gum catches the eye of the narrator's unnamed lover. As soon as the vendor looks away, the lover picks up the gum with his middle finger and challenges the narrator to chew the discarded gum. The narrator refuses, "no, you first," and watches as his lover sensually places the masticated gum on his tongue while maintaining eye contact (Fig. 5). The narrator reflects on his lover's desire to chew the discarded red gum, "I didn't quite get why you wanted me to chew that red gum after you as if making me share that pleasure with you. The gum was tasteless, sugarless. But it was fulfilling for the pleasure I saw in your eyes."[63] This scene is repeatedly referenced by the narrator throughout the film, each time revealing new information. Throughout the film, the lovers sing *Tamally Maak* ("Always with you") by celebrated Egyptian singer Amr Diab, the song's original rendition

[60] Zaatari, *Red Chewing Gum*, 2000.
[61] Ibid., 2:20.
[62] Ibid., 3:41.
[63] Ibid., 6:39.

which tells of the inseparable bond between two people. The narrator's lover sings the chorus of Diab's song acapella throughout *Red Chewing Gum*.

> I feel I'm always with you
> Even when you are away, your love survives inside of me
> Makes me feel always with you
> Always in my mind and heart
> Missing you, even when next to you.[64]

Interesting to note is that Diab's song, and much of Levantine and Arabic love songs and poetry are written using a masculine Arabic subject pronoun for 'you.' In the original Arabic song, *missing you,* or *maak,* is the masculine subject pronoun of the term, as opposed to the feminine pronoun which would be *maaki*. Diab's choice is not unique in Arabic music nor representative of a homoerotic relationship; male adjectives, pronouns, and subjects are in fact standard in both contemporary and classical Arabic romantic literature, poetry, and music by writers and singers regardless of gender. Considering the homoerotic undertones and context of *Red Chewing Gum*, however, it is interesting to note that from a linguistic sense, the lover's address of Diab's verbatim chorus to his male lover is grammatically accurate. While Diab's original rendition refers to a heterosexual couple, the song can be just as smoothly appropriated for a non-heteronormative context.

Zaatari's film concludes with an intense feeling of longing; we learn with few details the narrator and his lover were separated immediately after their experience with the vendor boy, and have not reconnected, perhaps because of Beirut's segregated sectarian lines. The narrator tells us that he has moved out of Hamra and relocated to Ashrafieh, a predominantly Christian neighborhood in East Beirut, while his lover presumably stayed in Hamra, a Muslim district in West Beirut, and they have lost contact since their time with the vendor boy. The narrator

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[64] Ibid., 1:08.

explains that the fifteen-year-old VHS tapes likely left behind by his lover have faded with time, leaving the narrator to rely on his sensorial and olfactory memories. The narrator concludes with an impassioned address towards his lost ex-lover: “He [the vendor boy] sends you his regards, I hope you remember him.”[65] The narrator’s lack of closure with his lost lover forces him to remember what he can through degrading video stock and his own sensorial memories.

As Shanks writes, “we encounter the past, excavate, observe, clean and restore, gather and classify: imagination is a necessary component of this creative process.”[66] *Red Chewing Gum* invokes olfactory and haptic senses with zoomed shots of masticated gum, chewing, and the lover’s coloured tongue after spitting out the red gum. As the narrator explains to his lover, “your videotapes faded with time and became colourless,” (Fig. 6) expressing his attempt to capture fleeting time. “When I go back to your tapes looking for the details, I see emptiness, a featureless face,” he tells us. Zaatari’s film visualises reminiscing through sensorial recall, focusing on senses of taste, touch, smell, and sound, evoking Mark’s concept of haptic visuality.[67] Marks writes, “in haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch,” such that haptic cinema “encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image.”[68] The muddied memories of fifteen years ago, instead, remain in the narrator’s consciousness and manifest through the chorus of *Tamally Maak*, through the sounds of gunshots, the smell of car fumes and, as he describes it, “the sun of February penetrating my skin…and I feel your hand touching mine, your hand touching mine.”[69]

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[65] Ibid., 10:07.
[66] Shanks, “The Archaeological Imagination,” 48.
[67] Marks, “The Skin of the Film,” 162.
[68] Ibid., 162-164.
[69] Zaatari, *Red Chewing Gum*, 9:42.

Central to the video is the red chewing gum, which has non-heteronormative and queer undertones. A seemingly innocent and childish flavourful material alludes to the sexual undertone between the male protagonists. The narrator and his lover touch the scrapped gum, place it in their mouths, suck on it, chew it, spit it out and share it amongst each other, masticating it after it has been discarded by the vendor. The chewed gum remains fascinating and pleasurable for all three characters in *Red Chewing Gum*. The vendor is fixated on his stock of gum and continues to destroy his means of profit to revel in the sugary taste of every new piece. The gum compels the characters in the dark alleyway, the vendor boy and lover acting seemingly illogically towards the situation; the vendor boy consumes his stock of gum which he continues to make unsellable, while simultaneously the two lovers find value in discarded pieces. The vendor boy finds himself in a queer act, defying capitalistic logics and acts against self-interest to revel in the granules of sugar—such that Zaatari has constructed a queer (and to an extent Marxist) act which seems to make sense in the apocalyptic situation the characters find themselves in. Considering that this act is followed by the sounds of gunshots and the three characters finding safety in a dark alleyway, Zaatari has appropriated a common, insignificant object into a metaphor, into a queer reading of the conflict of the Civil Wars. What seems to be an illogical response to the onset of conflict, the characters act against their self-interest and revel in pleasure within the queer-coded alleyways inside the neighbourhood of Hamra.

Edible matter is a compelling agent in the scene with the three characters projecting desires onto the gum. Whereas the vendor is fixated on the chemical activation of the gum and its sugars, the couple is captivated by the vendor's obsession, translating cravings of sugar to their desire for one another. The gum here can be read as forming the milieu of human action; as political theorist Jane Bennett writes, "food will appear as an actant inside and alongside

intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity-wielding, and culture-making human beings, and as an inducer-producer of salient, public effects."[70] The vendor's dependency on his stock of chewing gum in a time of stress is not insignificant; Bennett writes that "food, as a self-altering dissipative materiality, is also a player. It enters into what we become," such that it is one of the many agencies "operative in the moods, cognitive dispositions, and moral sensibilities that we bring to bear."[71] Considering Bennett's theorizing of edible matter, Zaatari constructs an engaging tension between the vendor's craving for sugar and the lovers' fascination of chewing each other's gum—the gum becoming representative of both chemical and sexual desire.

Zaatari discusses the role of gum in *Red Chewing Gum* as a "quite particular object because it is about the power between two people and desire."[72] Zaatari told me of the time he showed his film to his then supervisor Dr. Bénédicte Savoy, French art historian at the Technical University of Berlin,

> [Savoy] and I were walking on the street, and she said 'This film is quite Parisian.' I asked her why. She said, 'in my day, in the 80s, when I used to live in Paris, I had a queer friend who would look for boys of a certain age chewing gum, and follow them and wait until they throw the gum on the street'…*Red Chewing Gum* where one is chewing gum, and then forcing someone to chew the gum a third time, they are linked by transitivity…For me, the power of the chewing gum is that it takes the form of the inside of the person you desire. It's like moulding someone's mouth.[73]

As Zaatari explains in our correspondence, *Red Chewing Gum* was a commission from curator Christine Tohme sponsored by Beirut's contemporary art space, *Ashkal Alwan*. In 2000, Tohme invited thirteen artists to reflect on the recent history of Hamra Street and explore its

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[70] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 39.
[71] Ibid., 51.
[72] Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, February 17, 2023.
[73] Ibid.

image as one of Beirut's busiest and renowned streets during pre-war time. The exhibition included several site-specific works by Rita Aoun, Walid Sadek, Jalal Toufic, Lamia Joreige, and others. The works were installed in different sites of the street such as former movie theatres Hamra, Strand, and Colisée cinemas, as well as rolling commercial billboards.[74] With this context, Zaatari explains that the Hamra Street Project was an important event for the artistic community in Beirut, and his film worked to capture the essence of pre-war Hamra as a commercial hub.

As Shanks outlines, a sense of place is a specific feature of archaeological encounter: "engagement with place is often a complex affective experience [which] can relate to the poly-temporality of place, the topological folding of time inherent in our perception of site or place, as old things mingle with new."[75] Hamra's symbol of commercial success in pre-war Beirut, and simultaneously its economic destruction during the war is represented through the vendor in the film. After fifteen years of civil wars, the Hamra neighbourhood has been destroyed, rebuilt, and gentrified, and *Red Chewing Gum* speaks to a distant past of the neighbourhood through the seemingly illogical (or anti-capitalist) actions of the vendor boy, acting in his self-interest and rejecting profit incentives in order to savour the sweet taste of sugar.

As he sifts through old memories and degrading film, the narrator in *Red Chewing Gum* shows a crucial element of the archaeological imagination, working through remains and vestiges, bits remaining as well as traces, footprints, and imprints. Shanks details that ruin and phantasm is a feature of archaeology, "it deals in a past which is not so much over and done, no longer present, as both present in ruins and remains and uncannily non-absent phantasms,

[74] Lamia Joreige, "Hamra Street Project, Beirut (2000)," Lamia Joreige, 26 October 2023, https://lamiajoreige.com/exhibitions/expos-1997-2004/.
[75] Shanks, "The Archaeological Imagination," 53.

hauntingly present."[76] The narrator's mention of the decaying VHS tapes represents disintegration of memory itself, and a state controlled media attempting to degrade evidence of civil conflict. Whereas Hamra Street is still an important historical and contemporary hub in Beirut's landscape, many elements of the narrator's memory can no longer be found or recovered, shown by the lack of closure at the film's conclusion and by the narrator's need to piece together old film and sense memories of his experience years ago. As Marks writes, "these memories remain embodied in the senses even when their stimulus has disappeared."[77] At the same time, however, much of the narrator's recollections continue to be; he can walk through the same streets and alleys of Hamra, see young vendor boys around the city, and buy packs of Chiclets (the same brand of chewing gum the vendor attempted to sell to the two lovers). Considering the popularity and availability of Chiclets in post-war Beirut, what remains from the narrator's memory is the haunting of his queer experience in the form of commodity. American Chiclets continue to exist as a specter of capitalist ideology, an ideology which the vendor boy in *Red Chewing Gum* attempted to disrupt, that nevertheless persisted through years of civil strife and economic degradation in Lebanon.

Throughout *Red Chewing Gum*, Zaatari focuses on the element of the body in relation to activating the memory of an object, as well as the significance of sensorial bodily experiences in memory recollection. The gum, in this case, can be described as *l'objet savant* such that it undergoes a physical and emotional transformation by those who chew it—the gum is conjoined with the mouths of the narrator and his lover. The significance of a trivial piece of gum as a crucial memory linking two lovers conveys the relationship of the body (or several bodies) to a physical object. In the case of *Red Chewing Gum*, the body is very intimately and materially

[76] Ibid., 54.
[77] Marks, "The Skin of the Film," 201.

present in this transformation, such that the saliva of the vendor boy, the narrator, and his lover mark the edible material. In Zaatari's later works, *In This House* and *Letter to Samir,* we see the ways in which objects, uncovering and producing them, works as a link between relationships and people that are not physically or temporally together, such that objects can be employed as a memory tool to revisit past relationships.

Chapter 3: Folding and Unfolding in *In This House* (2005) and *Letter to Samir* (2009)

In This House (2005) is one of Zaatari's documentary films that takes place in the garden of a home in Ain el Mir, Saida where the artist attempts to locate and excavate a letter written and buried by a member of the leftist resistance in 1991. Zaatari was doing research on personal documents that people kept, particularly in times of war, and contacted Saida-based photojournalist Ali Hashisho hoping he might provide Zaatari with stories that came out of his work as a journalist. Discussing the conception of *In This House*, Zaatari says, "I did not expect that he would be the person I was looking for."[78] As Zaatari explains, following the Israeli withdrawal from Saida in 1985, the village of Ain el Mir became the frontline, and as a result the residents of the formerly occupied village were forced to leave. As a member of the leftist resistance allied with the Democratic Popular Party, Hashisho occupied a house in the village owned by the Dagher family. When the war ended in 1991, Hashisho wrote a letter to the Dagher family justifying his occupation there and welcoming them back home. Hashisho placed the letter inside the empty case of a B-10, 82 mm mortar, and buried it in the garden.

When Zaatari and Hashisho met, Hashisho told the artist that the letter should still be buried in the garden, "two steps away from the right corner of the house."[79] Hashisho expressed to Zaatari that he wanted the letter to stay buried for an indefinite time, but as Zaatari points out, "time ended up being me."[80] Zaatari went to the Dagher family home, and suspicious of the artist's intentions, the patriarch of the family, Charbel, did not believe Zaatari was a filmmaker. However, unable to live without knowing if there actually was a buried object in the garden, the

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[78] Chad Elias, "The Libindal Archive: A Conversation with Akram Zaatari," *Tate Papers* no. 19 (Spring 2013), Accessed 2 August 2022, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/19/the-libidinal-archive-a-conversation-with-akram-zaatari.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

family finally agreed, as long as official authorities were present throughout the excavation process. Hashisho maintained his distance from the family, for obvious reasons. The documentary is a multi-channel display which simultaneously shows an interview between Zaatari and Hashisho, still images, and the excavation itself, with subtitles/contextual information that fades to black throughout the film (Fig. 7).

Zaatari and Hashisho are both from Saida and are close in age. As Zaatari explains, the two "lived through the same war from different class positions."[81] Still, Hashisho took notes in diaries in the same manner that Zaatari did and also documented the war with a camera, learning photography in his adolescence, much like the artist. Throughout *In This House*, Zaatari shows the viewer several photographs of Hashisho's diaries and writing, and several banal objects Hashisho collected while on the frontlines, including acorns, leaves, coloured rocks, and several photographs Hashishio took as reminders of his time on the front (Fig. 8). Zaatari reveals Hashisho's collection of objects and photographs as a personal archival process, exhibiting the quotidian ritual of creating physical reminders of the past in the present and future.

The thirty-minute film features split screens juxtaposing snippets of interview footage with Hashisho as well as close-shots of Faisal, the gardener whom Zaatari hired to dig for the letter in the garden. Accompanied by the neighbours, a military representative and the police, the Dagher family asked not to be filmed, so Faisal is the only figure we see in full throughout the duration of the film. Legs and torsos are seen hovering over Faisal, anxiously conversing and murmuring commentaries as they await the discovery of the mortar shell and its contents. Throughout the film, the camera is focused on Faisal's movements and the tedious sounds of his shovel scraping at the ditch he digs. Later in the film, we discover that Faisal is fasting for

[81] Ibid.

Ramadan. Faisal stands inside the ditch and rests his body against it, before switching to a pickaxe to break through the tougher layers of the ground. The dig quickly becomes monotonous and visually interchangeable for some time, here showing the (often invisible) labour-intensive process and physical effort required to excavate the past. After some time, Faisal needs a break, so one of the policemen takes over the search, and Zaatari turns off the camera.

Off-screen, we hear commotion and new voices joining the conversation from the community joining to observe and comment on the excavation. After a few minutes of rest, Faisal continues to dig while we hear conversations between Zaatari and Charbel, the policemen, the neighbours, and the Dagher children as they wait restlessly. “That’s it, that’s it!” exclaims a voice off-screen as Faisal finally pulls out a green mortar case from the dirt (Fig. 9). Faisal hands the mortar case to a police man who tells the gardener, “Don’t play with it, don’t open it,” (27:27). As the mortar case is broken open, a few young boys approach, intrigued by the discovery. The man reads the letter out loud,

> “Doomed is a nation that eats what it doesn’t produce, and wears what it doesn’t weave.” Gibran Khalil Gibran. We are the Democratic Popular Party in Lebanon; a communist party that believes in the eventual triumph of the poor, and the abolition of Man’s exploitation of Man. June 30, 1991. The war was imposed on us, and we were in the position to protect our land from the Israeli plans in Lebanon. We used to be, and still are, against forced displacement, demolition and against violating people’s dignities. Welcome, this is your land, your property and your right. We did our best to protect the olive trees, but as you see, chaos prevails. However, we protected the houses and what remained of the property. We will miss Ain el Mir, which sheltered us for six years. Thank you to Ain el Mir and its beloved people (Fig. 10).

The film concludes after the letter is read, and one woman off-screen is seemingly underwhelmed with the contents of the letter—she asks, “that’s it?” We are shown a photograph of the letter and mortal shell (Fig. 11&12).

In This House unearths the remnants of difficult relationalities and an unconcluded past; the existence of the letter forces a confrontation with memory and reopens wounds for the Dagher family. Despite an attempt to separate from the fragments of the Civil Wars, the young boys in the film, who were likely not born until after the conflict, are implicated in the fraught and unspoken relationalities haunting their parents and older family members. As Sami Hermez explains in *War is Coming*, "in the case of Lebanon, people have repressed such things as their complicity, guilt, regret, horror, anger, and disgust to move on. Encounters with combatants threatened to bring back these repressed emotions and disrupted their ability to forget (tanasī) the war smoothly and actively."[82]

In this way, even though Hashisho was not present during the excavation at the Dagher home, the buried object forces the family to confront and nuance their understanding of the past, emotional memories, and predispositions that led to their present conception of the history of the Civil Wars. As such, the buried letter is an auratic object and aura, as Marks describes, "is what makes the fetish volatile, because it incites us to memory without ever bringing memory back completely."[83] Auratic objects, or fossils are not "cold stone objects but rather live, dangerous things."[84] The aura of the buried letter, which can also be described as its "radioactivity," hints to the Dagher family that the past to which the object points is still not over. *In This House* visualises what Zaatari refers to as the "communities of objects," such that the letter becomes enmeshed in the lives of the person who produced the artefact, those involved in the excavation, and those who are faced with the existence of the letter, in the present, and in the future.[85]

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[82] Hermez, *War is Coming*, 186.
[83] Marks, "The Skin of the Film," 81.
[84] Ibid., 84.
[85] Akram Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, February 17, 2023.

The young children shown in the concluding minutes of Zaatari's recording are intrigued by the excavation and listen to the contents of the letter intently; Zaatari records the passing of knowledge over generations, such that the boys become enmeshed in the same histories that their parents have lived through. As Hermez writes,

> In the absence of former fighters, people could generally take solace in notions that fighters are guilty, monstrous, and do not really retain power in the "dead certain" way they did during wartime…In this way, a lack of official mechanisms of accountability gave way to people trying to produce their own forms of accountability, but largely left with ambiguous practices and discourses, and often burdened with frustrations, anxieties, and the feeling that war was not in the past but visibly seeping into the present.[86]

In This House reveals the fragility of the conclusion of the Lebanese Civil Wars and the state's decision towards amnesty, a lack of closure which was then projected onto the Lebanese people. The Dagher family had to face their own prejudices upon hearing the letter read out; "they did not want to accept the idea that a so-called freedom fighter (whom they considered a militiaman) could express these sentiments."[87] Of course, while the Dagher family was faced with their prejudices, not all those who are confronted with their preconceived notions are necessarily transformed.

While we cannot know what the Daghers' sentiments were after the filming of *In This House* concluded, we can recognize the potential for Zaatari's intervention to break through sectarian walls and create conditions for radical hope. At the very least, the excavation of the letter introduces a mourning for the past, not a moving-on from the past which seeps into the present, but rather, "letting oneself have an altered and therefore radical relationship with the past by letting oneself be changed."[88] The excavation of the past as shown through Zaatari's

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[86] Hermez, *War is Coming*, 181.
[87] Elias, "The Libidinal Archive," *Tate Papers*.
[88] Dina Georgis, "Akram Zaatari's Queer Radical Hope: On Being a Curious Archivist/Artist," *Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics* 69 (September 2016): 20.

intervention creates a radical aesthetic space for insight and reparation, inviting individuals to re-engage with enigmatic, auratic, "radioactive" objects of the past. Since these objects are bound with a person's fears, conflicts, desires, and longings, "the outcome of this relational process is an aesthetic adventure that animates and sets us on a journey of adventurous thinking."[89] While the film revolves around the buried letter, an unsatisfied utterance at the conclusion of the excavation—"that's it?"—tells us that the content of the letter itself is not what compels us to alter our understanding of personal histories. Rather, it is the existence of the object from the past seeping into the present, and simultaneously, our return to the auratic object, an object that can never completely satisfy our desire to recover such memories.

In his interview with Chad Elias, Zaatari recounts a conversation with a representative of the Lebanese Army who supervised the excavation. The witness asks: "did you notice that the family would have preferred not to find the letter?"[90] In my own conversations with Zaatari, he divulged that several of his colleagues had similar critiques of his work, a critique of which "is totally legitimate."[91] Zaatari spoke to Walid Sadek, another Lebanese artist who, despite expressing a liking for the film, believed that "we don't need to divulge all people's secrets."[92] Zaatari also noted that a film such as *In This House* can be represented as opportunistic, considering that the "West is waiting for us to write an alternative history of the war."[93] Taking into consideration these critiques, Zaatari created a response to *In This House* three years later, with his 2008 film, *Letter to Samir.* "When I cut a tree, I need to plant a tree as well," Zaatari told me.[94]

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[89] Ibid.
[90] Elias, "The Libidinal Archive," *Tate Papers*.
[91] Akram Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, February 17, 2023.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

Letter to Samir (2008), a 32-minute film, foregrounds the beholding of secrets, and more importantly, the preservation of secrets for a future moment. Lebanese fighters held in Israeli prisons developed ways of communicating via letters written in miniature *msamsam* script, as tiny as sesame seeds. These letters discussed security issues especially between the prisons' central leadership in Nafha and Askalan. The letters were wrapped twice or more with plastic and sealed like a capsule, which were then swallowed by prisoners to be transported securely and secretly out of prison. These letters were later extracted, cleaned, and delivered to a second prisoner, identified to be heading to a significant destination. The capsules would be swallowed again before they reached their destination. In rare instances, capsules were transported from one prisoner to another through mouth to mouth across border fences.

In the film Nabih Awada, who had been imprisoned in Israel for ten years from the age of sixteen, writes a letter to Samir Al-Qintar after his release by the Israeli occupation in July 2008. Al-Qintar was captured during a military operation led by armed fighters from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) against a target in Nahariya in Israel in April 1979, and had become Israel's longest held Lebanese prisoner until his release in July 2008. On July 16, 2008, Al-Qintar was released as part of an exchange agreement between Israel and Hezbollah, and in his first public appearance, was wearing a Hezbollah military uniform. Zaatari asks Awada to write to the former member of the PLO and ask him why he was photographed in his first public appearance after his release, in the Islamic party's uniform. In 1991, the Lebanese left had been disarmed and disbanded. By 1997, Hezbollah was erasing the history of former leftist groups,

and in contrast to the socially progressive collection of groups that comprised the Lebanese left, Hezbollah is entrenched in sectarian division and religious laws.[95]

Letter to Samir begins with a close-up shot of Awada's hands using a ruler to create straight lines on a blank page. Awada then states Al-Qintar's first name and for the next nineteen minutes of the film, sits at a desk to write his letter in silence, taking pauses to reread what he writes (Fig. 13). In his own words, Zaatari describes the first half of *Letter to Samir* as rather "boring," as we watch Awada writing a long letter in silence, the content of which remains unknown to us.[96] When Awada finishes writing, he grabs a ruler from the desk and uses it to tear away the excess paper from his letter. The shot shifts to a close-up aerial view of Awada's desk as we watch his hands closely folding the piece of paper repeatedly. Awada uses the ruler to form tighter creases for a smoother fold. He rolls the letter into a small cylinder, what seems to be the width of a pill (Fig. 14). We witness Awada encasing the capsule in a layer of clear plastic and tying the edges with a thin dark thread. He repeats this meticulous process and burns the edges of the plastic to seal the capsule. On a slip of paper, Awada addresses the letter to Samir Al-Qintar's name and wraps the paper around the sealed capsule, encases the letter two more times in clear plastic, ties the ends, and burns the edges once more (Fig. 15). Zaatari provides a close-up of the tightly bound capsule through the layers of plastic of which we see that the letter is addressed to Samir Al-Qintar, written in Arabic (Fig. 16).

Much in the same vein as Faisal's monotonous picking at the layers of garden soil, Awada's methodical process of sealing the letter highlights the crucial role of the body as an embedded element of the doing (or undoing) of an archival process. Awada's thorough process

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[95] Judith Rodenbeck, "How's life in Lebanon? Especially…': On Akram Zaatari's Missives." In *All is Well: Akram Zaatari* (Kingston and Ottawa: Agnes Etherington Art Centre and Carleton University Art Gallery: 2014), 14.
[96] Akram Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, February 17, 2023.

reminds the viewer of the inherent function of the letter as a digestible capsule, the body then becoming a vessel to transport information. In this case, letters written by political prisoners containing important communication between wards and prisons are transported using the most intimate bodily functions of these prisoners. The written messages are carried *in* the body—colonial relations are inscribed on/in the flesh of the body, "only to be narrativized into the collective one."[97] As Esmail Nashif writes, "the materiality and physicality of the message, or one might say the body of the message, are conditional on the on/in distinction in the depths of the human body."[98] As Nashif highlights, the *cabsulih* can be understood as where the confines between the personal and collective bodies are overcome, situating the bowels as a site of radical interchange where the individual body ends and the collective body begins.

The histories of Awada and his imagined correspondent are ones of shared national struggle and imprisonment. This is the pivotal link around which the two narratives revolve and is central to the film's unspoken language. We can only imagine what Awada might have written to his compatriot, empathy with his years of incarceration, the cause for which they had been fighting, confusion from the apparent shift in Al-Qintar's ideological allegiances.

With *Letter to Samir*, Zaatari inverts the archaeological imagination that was witnessed in *In This House*. As Shanks writes, an element of the archaeological imagination is transformation, such that "archaeological excavation actually destroys the past in its selection of what to preserve or conserve."[99] Whereas *In This House* can be seen as the process of unfolding, deconstructing, and dismantling of an archaeological fold, *Letter to Samir* represents a practice of folding, sacrificing parts for a purpose, concealing some parts, such as the content of Awada's letter, and

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[97] Esmail Nashif, "Building the Community: The Body, the Material Conditions, and the Communication Networks," in *Palestinian Political Prisoners: Identity and Community* (London: Routledge, 2010), 66.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Shanks, "The Archaeological Imagination," 54.

highlighting others, such as the practice and method of conservation and dissemination of said letters between prisoners.

Discussing the relationship between the two films, Zaatari explains, “If I consider that I unearthed something that was hidden, buried, then I need to produce a secret for the future…I did the thing and its reverse, because I think we need to do the thing and its reverse.”[100] In his practice, Zaatari reorients private, intimate, and personal documents to complicate institutional and state histories regarding the events of the war. Taking to heart the critiques made of *In This House*, Zaatari’s act of protecting Awada’s letter, the contents of which remain unknown, resists a clean, narrative end to Awada’s personal history, showing that the aftermath of the civil war will not necessarily have a sense of closure. Awada’s letter is a method of preservation that resists legibility, and results in a form of revisiting memory without finality—the letter is not a closing of this chapter of history, but rather a form of radical hope, or invitation for future alterings of understanding the memory of the events of the war.

[100] Akram Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, February 17, 2023.

Conclusion: Memory, Desire, and Resisting Forgetfulness

"Archives do not merely exist as 'the archive,' but are being constantly made (and unmade) through the interactions and desire of people across time and space."[101] Lara Lookabaugh goes on to say: "archives should be viewed as webs of relations across time and space bound up in the individual and collective actions of physical bodies both within and beyond archives themselves."[102] In Zaatari's films, we see artefacts of the past, or objects intended for the future, encasing within them the intimate web of relationships that also surround them. Zaatari talks about "communities of objects" or "*peopling* objects" which centre intimate encounters and etch memory traces on objects and people over space and time.[103]

In the case of Zaatari's three films, encased objects are masticated, opened, and broken apart. Intimate relations are brought into the present, somewhat like a genie in a bottle, with personal memories being actively released when an object is found, encountered, altered. The release, as a form of memory practice, requires an act of destruction. Zaatari's memory practice reveals that to revisit memory, the container in which it exists must be altered, changed, or in some cases, destroyed, to do so.

In the case of *Red Chewing Gum*, the characters release the sugar encased in a piece of gum, destroying and mending its sugary coating in the process of enjoyment. Simultaneously, as the narrator watches his VHS tapes to revisit his time with his past lover, he strips the tape, further degrading the object which connects him to the past itself. In a means to feel closer to a memory, the narrator defies preservation of the object, further distancing himself from his past

[101] Lora Lookabaugh, "Body of Evidence: Time and Desire in Embodied Archives," *Qualitative Inquiry* 28, no. 10 (2022): 1039.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, February 17, 2023.

lover. Zaatari then explores a different form of intimacy with *In This House* in which he takes on the role of an archaeologist, destroying the Dagher family's garden to reveal the family's interconnected lived experience in the larger strife of the civil wars—an interconnectedness the family does not necessarily wish to relive. The contents of Hashisho's buried letter, as someone implicated in the family's history, is nearly as volatile as the mortar shell in which it is encased. In a similar vein, *Letter to Samir* reveals the intimate relationships between two prisoners and their own intertwined histories. Much like *Red Chewing Gum*'s narrator, who speaks to his lost love, Awada writes to al-Qintar, even though his words may never reach al-Qintar. In this way, all three of Zaatari's films employ objects as a placeholder for a past relationship, creating an avenue to revisit an unresolved past. The existence of the object and its ability to shuttle between the past and the present charges the emotional ties which the object excites and unearths, reminding spectators that the past is always, with complexity, still alive. Yet a sense of longing overshadows the protagonists' ability to seek closure. The feeling that objects remain remote no matter how closely we embrace their auratic effect is haunting: "[the artefact] is distant from us in time even as it is present in space."[104] The desire to revisit the past through a physical object is a reminder that the people implicated with the existence of this object are no longer present.

Zaatari's films, and the objects and relationships which are implicated in them, revolve around a memory practice unconcerned with gaining closure on an historical moment. The artefacts in Zaatari's films work to remind the subjects of his films, and the viewers, of the personal and subjective relationships that existed in the past to which these objects are connected. This is the essence of Zaatari's *peopling-objects*. The artist tells me,

> At shrines, people not only touch because they want the blessing of the object, but because they want to belong to the community of whoever passed by and touched the

[104] Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 81.

> same shrine. That place carries a memory of a population, a community, that relates to this object.[105]

The unearthing of memories of the Civil Wars through Zaatari's complex artistic practice is a humanising experience. Rather than a capital-H historicization of the events of the war which form a static and immovable version of the past, stripping these events of their humanity and the people involved, the subjects of Zaatari's films are reminded that their past is not calcified within a suspended history.

Having had a chance to discuss Zaatari's practice, not solely as an artist, but as a witness to the Lebanese Civil Wars was an intimate memory practice in itself—and to use Zaatari's words, a *peopling* practice. Using an oral history approach to Zaatari's practice brings to light anecdotes, personal stories, and most notable to me, the artist's endearing humour which is too often removed from writings on (art) history. It was through this intimate research process that made me sensitive to the conditions of forced forgetting in past, and current global situations well beyond the scope of Lebanon. As I grapple to write this conclusion, proofread sections of my thesis, and fixate on my word choice, the world is witnessing a number of distressing conflicts burning with the same intensity as Lebanon's Civil Wars past—some more geographically distant, and others disturbingly close. The Russian invasion of Ukraine now enters its 20th month of conflict. Less than a month ago, on October 7th, Palestinian militant group Hamas conducted a series of attacks onto bordering areas in Israel and took over 200 hostages from Southern Israel, sparking an ongoing relentless bombardment in Gaza by Israeli troops.

[105] Zaatari in discussion with the author, over Zoom, February 17, 2023.

Roelstraete writes, "our culture's quasi-pathological systemic infatuation with both the New and the Now ('youth') has effectively made forgetting and forgetfulness into one of the central features of our contemporary condition."[106] Despite global public outrage, states rely on social amnesia, and eventual forgetting, whether through forceful means (cutting internet and mobile communication services), apathy, exhaustion, or misinformation. Forgetfulness becomes a crucial tool in perceptions of war, such that leaders of conflict can circumvent accountability for military occupation and crimes against humanity. Whereas memory practice, such as in the case of Zaatari's films, is a deeply personal and individual experience, it is equally a political one. Eve Tuck writes that "desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness."[107] Deleuze has stated that desire creates "desiring-machines," which can disrupt existing systems, derailing something, or displacing the social fabric.[108] Memory practice is thus driven by a desire and care to remember, despite fortified institutional, national, and state forces attempting to bury their crimes against humanity, forces which benefit from late-stage capitalist attention economy, speed, and noise to weaponize social amnesia.

Memory practice in the realm of global and national conflict, and as Zaatari's films highlight, is a gruelling and invasive process, one that requires an intense physical and emotional disentombing. Simultaneously, such a process requires attention and care beyond the noise and momentum of economy and state control vying for forward acceleration with no desire to revisit the past. Zaatari's films offer a method of critical memory practice and an embodiment of a

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[106] Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art," *E-Flux Journal* 4 (March 2009).
[107] Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 417.
[108] Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2004).

desire that challenges forgetting, encouraging a confrontation and reflection of the past, and the ways in which the past influences interpersonal, national, and state relationships to the present. Such a memory practice reminds us that the past is the present; it is also the future too.

Figures



Fig. 1. Akram Zaatari, *Najm (left) and Asmar (right). Studio Shehrazade, Saida, Lebanon, 1950s. Hashem el Madani*, photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 2007. Source: Tate Britain, courtesy of Hashem el Madani and Arab Image Foundation, Beirut, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/zaatari-najm-left-and-asmar-right-studio-shehrazade-saida-lebanon-1950s-hashem-el-madani-p79496



Fig. 2. Akram Zaatari, *Abul Jalal Dimassy (centre) and Two of his Friends Acting Out a Hold-Up. Studio Shehrazade, Saida, Lebanon, 1950s. Hashem el Madani*, photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 2007. Source: Tate Britain, courtesy of Hashem el Madani and Arab Image Foundation, Beirut, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/zaatari-abu-jalal-dimassy-centre-and-two-of-his-friends-acting-out-a-hold-up-studio-p79470

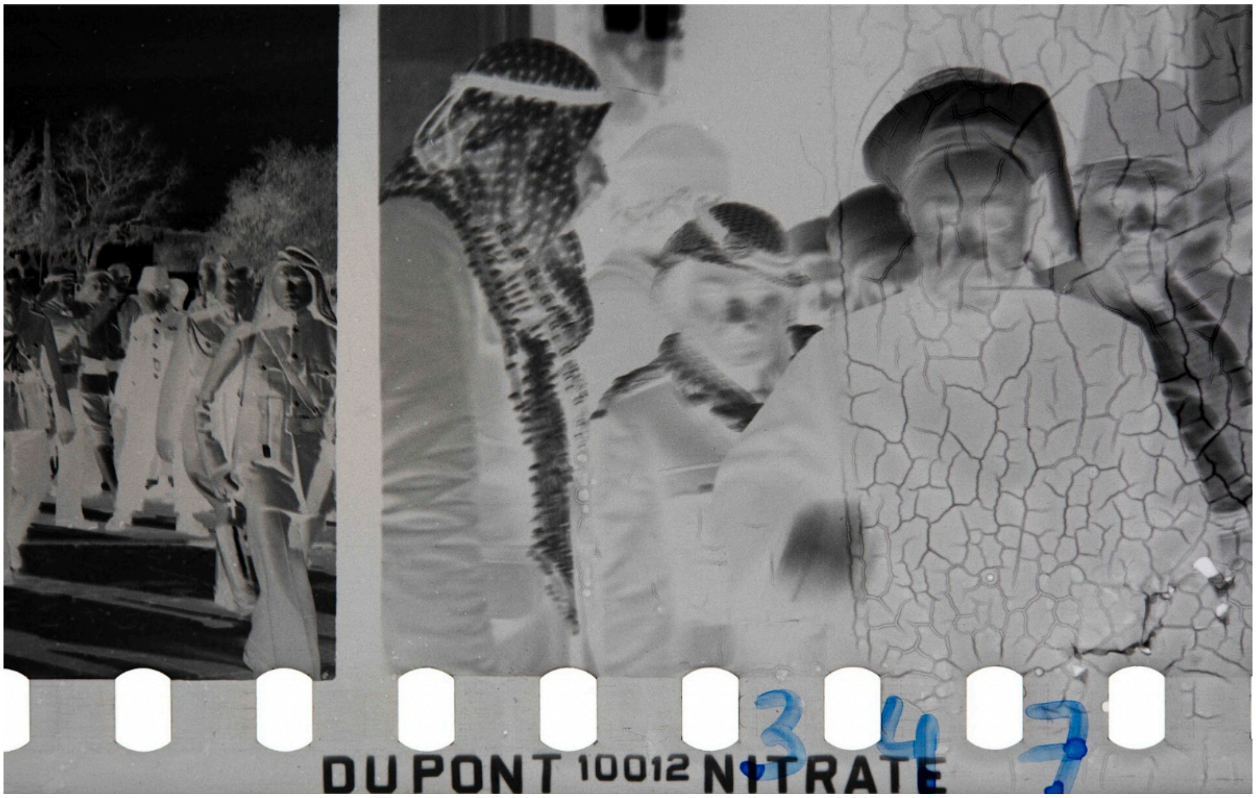


Fig. 3. Akram Zaatari, *Against Photography* (detail), 2017. Close up of a 35mm negative by Antranick Bakerdjian, Jerusalem, 1950s. Source: https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/93327/akram-zaatariagainst-photography-an-annotated-history-of-the-arab-image-foundation/

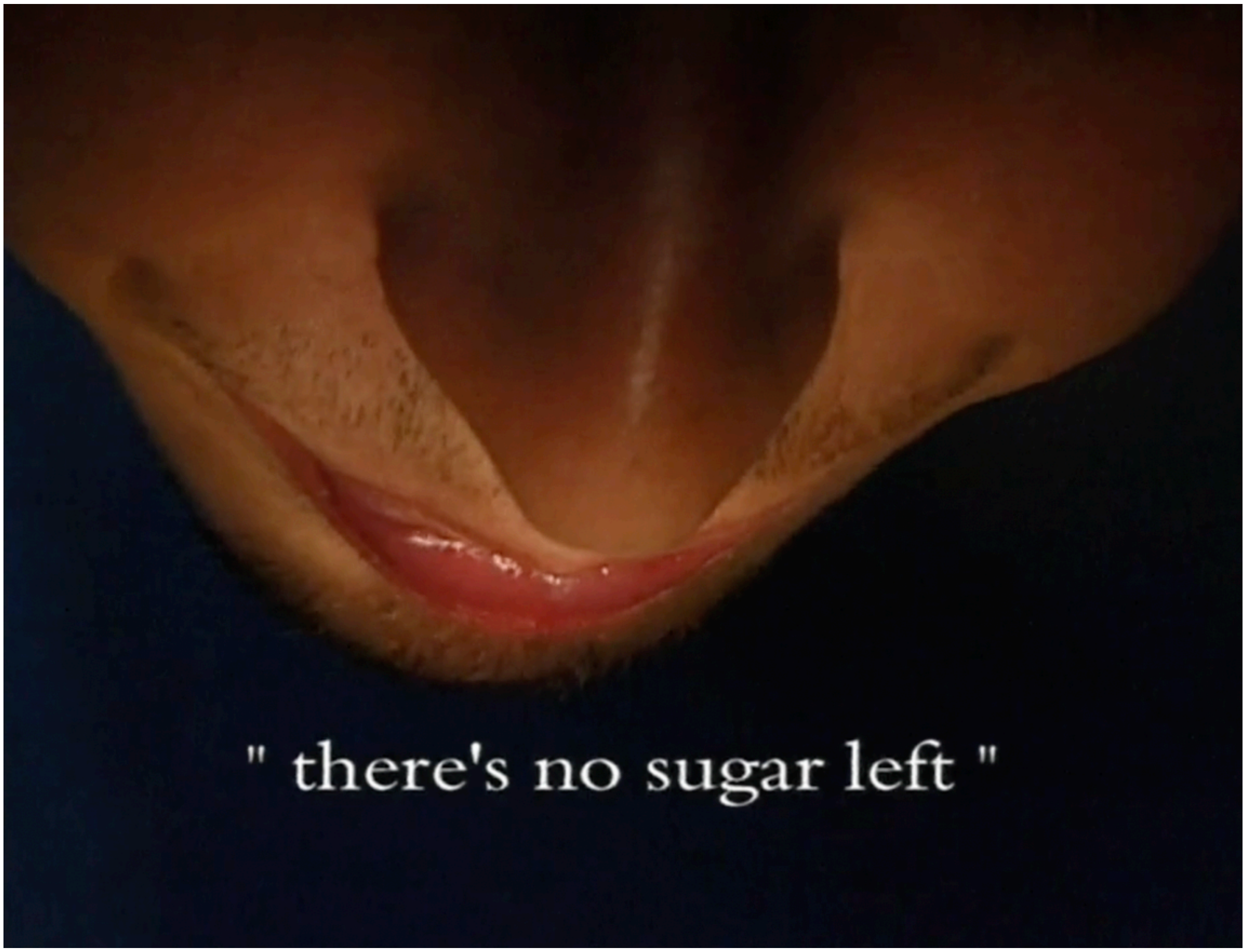


Fig. 4. Akram Zaatari, *Red Chewing Gum*, 2000, film still at 3:51. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5. Akram Zaatari, *Red Chewing Gum*, 2000, film still at 4:21. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6. Akram Zaatari, *Red Chewing Gum*, 2000, film still at 8:59. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 7. Akram Zaatari, *In This House*, 2005, film still at 14:45. Courtesy of the artist.

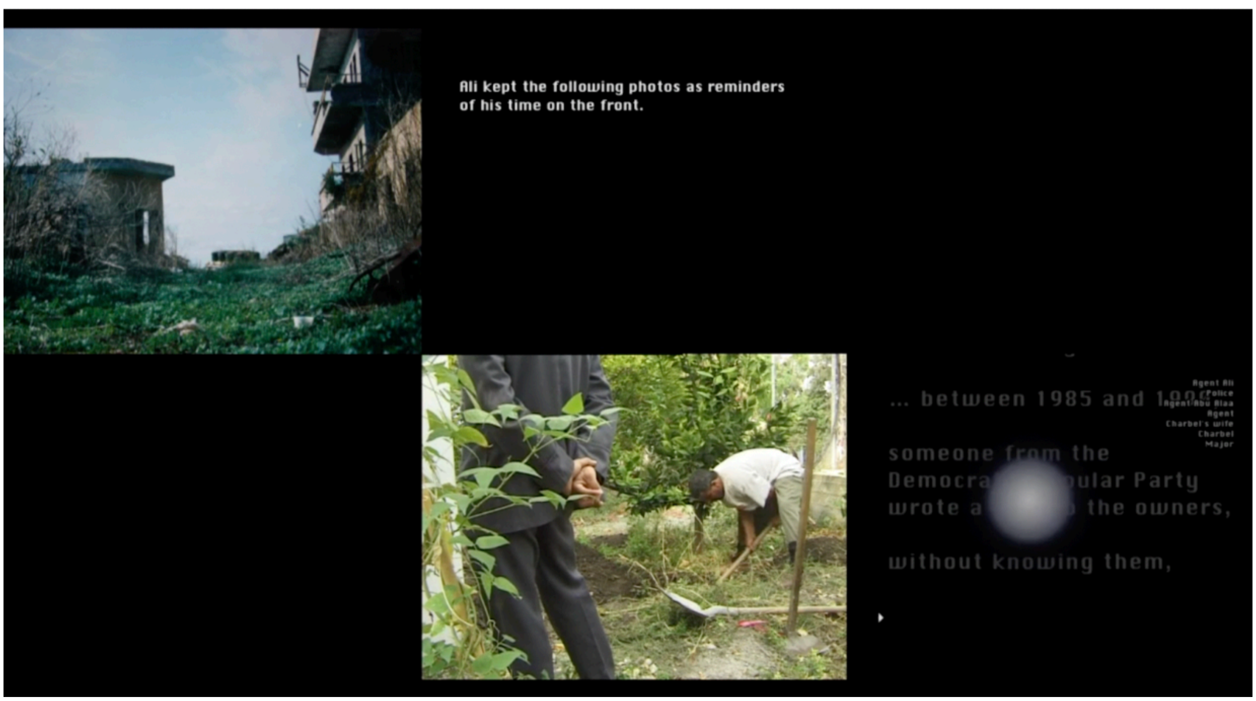


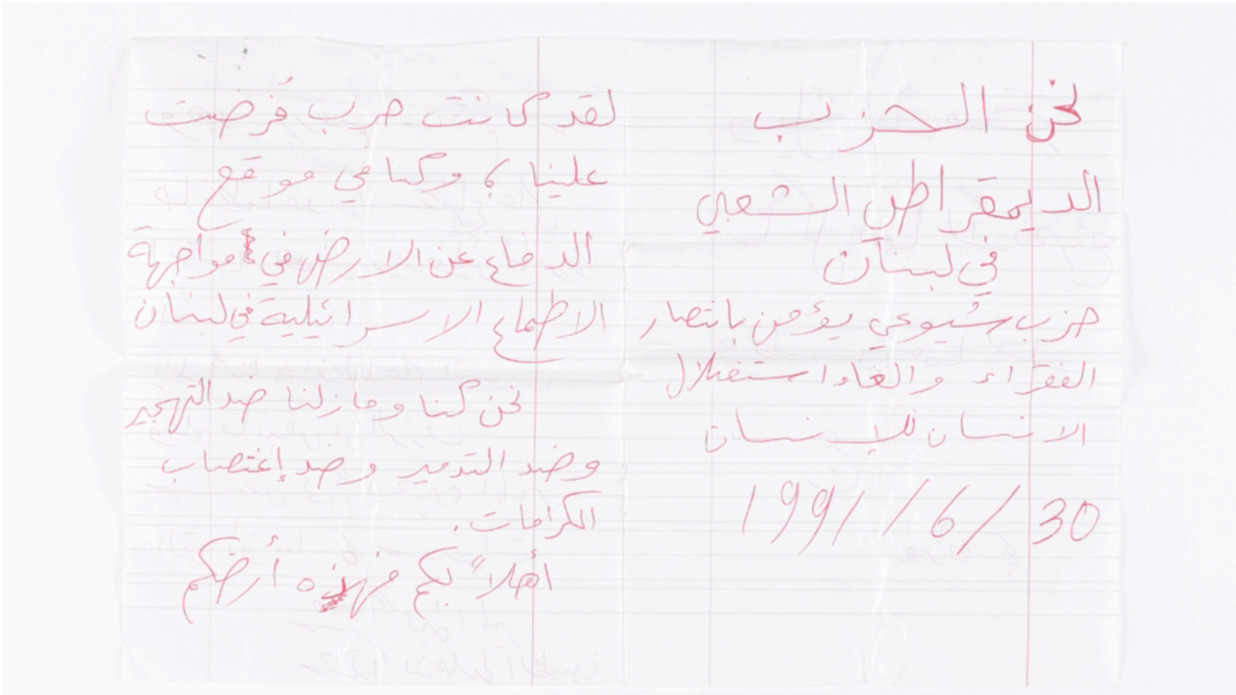
Fig. 8. Akram Zaatari, *In This House*, 2005, film still at 5:56. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 9. Akram Zaatari, *In This House*, 2005, film still at 27:24. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 10. Akram Zaatari, *In This House*, 2005, film still at 29:28. Courtesy of the artist.



نحن الحزب
الديمقراطي الشعبي
في لبنان
حزب شيوعي يؤمن بانتصار
الفقراء والعداء استغلال
الانسان للانسان
1991/6/30

لقد كانت حرب فرضت
علينا، وكنا في موقع
الدفاع عن الارض في مواجهة
الاطماع الاسرائيلية في لبنان
نحن كنا ومازلنا ضد التهجير
وضد التدمير وضد إغتصاب
الكرامات.
أهلاً بكم في هذه أرضكم

Fig. 11. Akram Zaatari, *In This House*, 2005, film still at 29:45. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 12. Akram Zaatari, *In This House*, 2005, film still at 29:53. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 13. Akram Zaatari, *Letter to Samir*, 2008, film still at 1:32. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 14. Akram Zaatari, *Letter to Samir*, 2008, film still at 20:59. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 15. Akram Zaatari, *Letter to Samir*, 2008, film still at 27:54. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 16. Akram Zaatari, *Letter to Samir*, 2008, film still at 31:46. Courtesy of the artist.

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